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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001826

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-21-13

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SUBJECT: In meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister reviews recent controversy involving monitors

Refs: (A) Colombo 1808, and previous

- (B) USDAO Colombo Ce IIR 6 816 0010 04

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In an October 20 meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister Marapana related that based on what he understood the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) had inadvertently thwarted a recent attempt by the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) to intercept a suspected Tiger arms ship. In light of the incident, Marapana said new operating procedures had to be developed with the SLMM. Marapana's calm reaction was worlds away from that of the press which accused the monitors of "tipping off" the Tigers. This latest incident comes at a time of increasing discontent within the military over the SLMM's inability to resolve Tiger ceasefire violations. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) DEFENSE MINISTER CONFIRMS INCIDENT: The Ambassador met with Defense Minister Tilak Marapana on October 20. During the discussion, Marapana confirmed the broad contours (with one key distinction) of press reports about an incident that took place off the northeast coast on October 16. According to Marapana, early on October 16 the SLN had received what appears to have been reliable reports that a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) arms resupply boat was in international waters off the northeastern coastal town of Mullaitivu, a well-known LTTE base of operations. Prior to searching for the Tiger ship and per established procedure, the SLN contacted the SLMM to arrange for one of the group's monitors to be present on board the naval vessels sent out for the search. (Note: The inclusion of an SLMM member by the SLN during such searches was agreed to after the sinking of an alleged LTTE ship in June where no monitoring personnel were present.) Marapana said the GSL had reason to believe that on receiving this information someone in the SLMM telephoned the LTTE and asked whether there was an LTTE boat in the area. Perhaps acting on this information, the LTTE boat escaped the SLN's reconnaissance net (see Para 6 for further information regarding the reported boat). Contrary to the press reports (see below), Marapana said he believed that the SLMM's efforts were not an attempt to help the Tigers escape detection.

3. (C) While agreeing that the exclusion of the SLMM from SLN operations was not an option, Marapana admitted that different operating procedures needed to be developed to ensure that such incidents did not happen in the future. Marapana noted that the Defense Ministry and the SLMM were working to improve coordination.

4. (SBU) THE PRESS REPORTS: As mentioned above, various press reports about the incident in English- and Sinhalese language media vilified the SLMM over the incident. The reports, which were probably generated by leaks from the military, essentially accused the SLMM of warning the Tigers, so that its boat was able to get away.

5. (C) When contacted on October 21 by poloff, Agnes Bragadottir, the SLMM spokesperson, was chagrined about the press reports. While admitting that the SLMM had contacted the LTTE about its boat's location, she commented that the SLMM had no intention whatsoever of "tipping off" the Tigers. She confirmed that the SLMM was committed to working with the Defense Ministry to improve coordination.

6. (C) COMMENT: As reviewed in Ref B, this latest incident comes at a time of increasing discontent within the military over the SLMM's inability to resolve Tiger ceasefire violations. In particular, the military is furious that the SLMM has been unable to resolve the LTTE's unauthorized occupation of the small "Wan Ela" camp near Trincomalee. Interestingly, in analyzing the

October 16 incident, the navy is apparently now unsure whether there was a LTTE resupply boat to begin with.
END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD